

GATT Translation Method for Elementary Mandarin Learners

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ABSTRACT

With China's economy blooming, many will take up Mandarin as it gains more popularity. In Malaysia, the number of non-Chinese learners taking up Mandarin as a foreign language is considerable. Apart from primary schools offering Mandarin classes, all of the public universities have also offered Mandarin courses for their students in order for them to improve their chances of employment. As learning Mandarin has become a trend, one cannot simply teach the subject and hope that learners can pick up the language. As there are diverse choices of learning methods, learners nowadays also hope to systematically learn and see their learning progress within a shorter time. Like most of the language learners, they will be very active in the beginning. When they do not achieve the desired result, their enthusiasm subsides, and they soon begin to lose interest. If the learner can grasp the accurate method of constructing grammatically correct simple sentences in a short time, they will have confidence to continue their learning. When the learner cannot find a proper way to learn, they will fall back on their first language learning experience. This negative transfer will affect the foreign language learning and more often than not, result in the construction of many incorrect and awkward sentences. GATT (Grouping-Arranging-Translating-Touch up) translation method which is derived from WSD (Words Sequence Diagram), is a method which helps learners to place the words in a correct sequence to form grammatically correct sentences. It can minimize the negative transfer of the mother tongue. Lastly, GATT translation method will guide learners through a step by step approach to complete the task of sentence construction and free learners from the fear of not knowing how to proceed.

Keywords: Mandarin; learning; learner; negative transfer; translation method

INTRODUCTION

When Malaysia achieved independence in 1957, the government in its constitution has accorded Malay language and English to be the National and second language respectively. However, other languages such as Mandarin, Tamil, Iban and Kadazan languages are still taught in public and private institutions.

In recent years, the number of non-Chinese students enrolling in Chinese primary schools has increased tremendously. One of the reasons is due to China's position as an economic superpower in the 21st century. As trade ties between Malaysia and China develop, Malaysian traders and investors intending to establish links and joint ventures in China need to communicate effectively in Mandarin.

In order to cope with the growing demand and awareness of learning Mandarin in Malaysia so as to tap the vast potential business market of China, the government has also included Mandarin as one of the third languages needed to be taught to undergraduates at tertiary level. For language instructors, teaching Mandarin to non-native learners is an arduous task. The task is made more challenging at tertiary level when these young adults are for the first time exposed to basic Mandarin and have to learn, understand and write in Mandarin within a relatively short span of time.

Non-native speakers, almost without exception, struggle with three common obstacles when they initially learn Mandarin. Firstly, they have difficulty in recognizing and writing the Chinese characters; secondly, they have difficulty in reading Chinese characters; and thirdly, they have difficulty in constructing sentences. When constructing sentences in Mandarin, it is very unlikely that students can do away with the influence of sentence patterns in their mother tongues. A language has its own grammatical and sentence making rules. It is typical of adult beginners to try to convey ideas in Mandarin by resorting to the grammatical patterns of other languages! To tackle these problems, we have proposed the use of "Word Sequence" Diagrams and GATT (Grouping-Arranging-Translating-Touch Up).

Students find GATT translation method helpful in their effort to translate sentences into the target language (Mandarin). Students using GATT do not need to have in-depth knowledge of the grammar rules of Mandarin. Besides, it does not take a long time to master this method which is a 4-step process.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Zhang (1990) provided some views on constructing sentences in Mandarin. Firstly, the logical development of events will form the pattern of conversing in Mandarin. For example, in 他拿筷子, 拿得很好 (translated as 'He uses chopsticks and uses them well'), note that we have to state 'He can use chopsticks' before we state 'He can use them well'. Secondly, Mandarin sentence patterns follow a chronological pattern of events. For example, in 他坐火车南下到广州 (translated as He took a train going south to Canton), the first event involves the taking of the train. The second event involves the train going south, while the third event involves the action of reaching the destination (Canton). Thirdly, in Mandarin sentence patterns, the arrangement of the nouns has to adhere to the

hierarchy (e.g. big to small, old to young). For example, in 他睡在我家客厅里的沙发上 (literally translated as ‘He slept in my house in the living room on the sofa’), the place is mentioned in the big – small order.

According to Hu (1995), a basic feature of a natural language is its ‘word sequence’. That means that when a person speaks he will speak word by word according to the time sequence. In a normal sentence, words are arranged according to the time sequence. If we want to make up a sentence, we do not only have to look into the word sequence, we have to establish the phrase sequence too. Mandarin itself does not have tenses like those found in English grammar, so the Chinese users depend entirely on word sequence and phrase sequence to express meaning.

Hu (1995) further explains that in sentence analysis, we have to dissect the sentence into certain parts until it reaches the most basic element in the sentence. Division of a sentence into phrases is done by putting brackets around each phrase. Word or phrase that have same type/form will put into a bracket and this type of bracketing is used in the GATT formula.

Hu further adds that Halliday (1985) in his book ‘*An introduction to Functional Grammar*’ assumes language to be multi-layered and multi-functional. When people express the meaning, they express them in concepts. When doing a translation, we should translate concepts that are embedded in a meaningful phrase rather than translating word by word without any consideration for these concepts. The translated sentence may distort the meanings as the concepts may run contrary to contexts of the original sentence.

According to Hoe and Kuek (2004) on how to construct sentences using the “word sequence” diagrams, the learners need to have a pool of vocabulary words. It is only after one has all the vocabularies of a target language in mind that one proceeds into correct sentence making. The “word sequence” diagrams builds on this basis and is exemplify in Table 1.

Table 1
 Word Sequence Diagrams

|  Time |  Subject |  Venue |  Activity |
|---|--|--|---|
| 今天 (Today) | 妈妈 | 去药房 | 看医生。 |
| 2004年6月1号 (1 st June, 2004) | (morning)(7 o'clock) | (mother) | (went to clinic) |
| 星期一 (Monday) | | | (to see a doctor) |
| (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) |
| | | (5) | (6) |

The ‘word sequence’ diagrams are very helpful for students in translation. When we take into account the grammatical theories of Zhang’s, they do not only support the theories but also present the crux of the theories. Instead of having to imbibe sets of

grammatical rules, students only have to remember a few icons and the general ‘word sequence’ diagrams when dealing with Mandarin. The diagrams help students to visualize the logical flow of the sentence pattern in Mandarin and thus help to present Mandarin sentences in a grammatically correct sequence. As such, students will gain more self-reliance when they attempt to construct Mandarin sentences on their own.

According to Gordon (1985) in his translation theory, one of the ongoing debates about translations revolves around the question of whether or not, and in what degree, the translation should reflect faithfully the message of the original text. However, many disagreed that translation should adhere closely to the grammatical forms of the original language. The underlying reason for reproducing the original sentence without retaining the form is that all languages have their own syntax. The syntax of one language may exhibit similarities as well as differences with the syntax of other languages. GATT helps to translate a source language (such as Bahasa Melayu) to the target language (such as Mandarin) correctly.

GATT Translation Method

At Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Mandarin lessons are conducted in Hanyu Pinyin (the Romanized System). At Universiti Teknologi Mara Pulau Pinang (UiTMPP), the undergraduates learning Mandarin are either Malay students or those from various indigenous groups in Malaysia. To them, Mandarin is considered a foreign language and they have never been exposed to the formal learning of this language.

In UiTMPP, engineering students are taught GATT. Being “Engineering – Minded”, they are more oriented towards the simple scientific step-by-step translation approach and not the flair of the language or the nuances in meaning for that matter. With such a scenario and the apparent limitations, the researchers have proposed the GATT (Grouping-Arranging-Translating-Touch Up) process-oriented translation method for two main reasons. Firstly, it does not involve the learning of grammar, and secondly it involves a relatively short period to acquire this constructed step by step method. Listed below are the stages employed chronologically in the GATT Translation Method.

G – Grouping of all the words according to the same concept.

A – Arranging the words grouped according to the ‘word sequence’ diagram

T – Translating the words

T – Touching up the sentences and carrying out the final correction.

Example 1

Manager Li rests at home today.

Step 1 : GROUPING – the sentence is broken down into smaller groups. These groups of words denote the types of phrases, for example, Noun Phrase (NP).

(Manager Li) (rests) (at home) (today).

Step 2 : ARRANGING – by utilizing the word sequence diagram

🕒 → ↑ → 🏠 → 🛋️ and arrange the grouping according to the diagram.

The groupings are numbered so as to facilitate translation.

| | | | |
|-------|------------|---------|-------|
| 🕒 | ↑ | 🏠 | 🛋️ |
| today | Manager Li | At home | rests |
| (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) |

Step 3 : TRANSLATING

(today) (Manager Li) (at home) (rests).
1 2 3 4

Jīntiān Lǐ jīnglǐ zài jiā xiūxi.

Step 4 : TOUCHING UP

Jīntiān Lǐ jīnglǐ zài jiā xiūxi.

| Check List Items | Note |
|--|------|
| Insert words like, de 的 / dì 地 / shì 是 / le 了 | X |
| After 这(this) and 那(that), add on a numerical coefficient. | X |
| Redundant words | X |
| Question – Subject needs to be placed in front. | X |
| *Special case | X |

So, no changes have to be made, the structurally correct answer is:

Jīntiān Lǐ jīnglǐ zài jiā xiūxi.

Example 2

I do not work on Sunday. I am going to jog at the park in the evening.

Step 1 : GROUPING

(I) (do not work) (on Sunday). (I am) (going) (to jog) (at the park) (in the evening).

Step 2 : ARRANGING - refer to 🕒 → ↑ → 🏠 → 🛋️

| | | | |
|-----------|---|---|--------------|
| 🕒 | ↑ | 🏠 | 🛋️ |
| on Sunday | I | - | do not work; |

| | | | | | |
|---|---|------|---|-----------------|---|
|  |  | |  | |  |
| at 7 p.m. this evening | We | want | to | in Kuala Lumpur | watch a movie |
| (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) | (5) | (6) |

Step 3 : TRANSLATING

(at 7 p.m. this evening.) (We) (want) (to) (in Kuala Lumpur) (watch a movie)
1 **2** **3** **4** **5** **6**
Zhè wǎnshang qī diǎn wǒmen yào qù zài Jílóngpō kàn diànyǐng

Step 4 : TOUCHING UP

Zhè wǎnshang qī diǎn wǒmen yào qù zài Jílóngpō kàn diànyǐng.

| Check List Items | Note |
|--|------|
| Insert words like, de 的 / dì 地 / shì 是 / le 了 | X |
| After 这(this) and 那(that), add on a numerical coefficient. | ✓ |
| Redundant words | ✓ |
| Question – Subject needs to be placed in front. | X |
| *Special case | X |

When ‘this’ appears, after ‘zhè’, add on numerical coefficient.
 Numerical coefficient for evening is ‘ge’ .

* In the above sentence, we can only use either ‘qù’ or ‘zài’, ‘zài’ (at/in) should be omitted as ‘qù’ preceding ‘zài’ is grammatically incorrect.

So, the structurally correct answer is:

Zhè ge wǎnshang qī diǎn wǒmen yào qù Jílóngpō kàn diànyǐng.

Example 4

I am going to your company again at 10 a.m. next Saturday.

Step 1 : GROUPING

(I) (am going to) (your company) (again) (at 10 a.m. next Saturday).

Step 2 : ARRANGING -refer to  →  →  → 

| | | | |
|---|---|--|---|
|  |  |  |  |
| at 9 a.m. next Saturday | I | am going to | your company. |
| (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) |
| | | | - |

(again) – Undecided where to place ‘again’, so leave it aside first.

Step 3 : TRANSLATING

(at 10 a.m. next Saturday) (I) (am going to) (your company) (again*).

1 2 3 4
*Xiàge xīngqīliù zǎoshang shí diǎn wǒ qù nǐ gōngsī zài**

* zài (again) – Still undecided where to place ‘again’, so leave it aside first.

Step 4 : TOUCHING UP

Xiàge xīngqīliù zǎoshang shí diǎn wǒ qù nǐ gōngsī zài

| Check List Items | Note |
|--|------|
| Insert words like, de 的 / dì 地 / shì 是 / le 了 | ✓ |
| After 这(this) and 那(that), add on a numerical coefficient. | X |
| Redundant words | X |
| Question – Subject needs to be placed in front. | X |
| *Special case | ✓ |

* In the above sentence, the adverb ‘zài’ (‘again’) precedes the verb ‘qù’ (‘go to’). When the sentence is written in Bahasa Melayu, the adverb which is a word to modify a verb, an adjective or another adverb is placed after the verb ‘come’. In refining or touching up the sentence in Mandarin, the student has to be aware that the adverb usually has to be positioned before the verb.

So, the structurally correct answer is:

Xiàge xīngqīliù zǎoshang shí diǎn wǒ zài qù nǐ de gōngsī.

CONCLUSION

As a conclusion, GATT Translation Technique could be a helpful guide for educators to assist non-native speakers in the translation of simple sentences to Mandarin. This simple four-step technique, namely grouping, arranging, translating and touching up, is both handy and practical. Beginners learning the new language (Mandarin) can depend on this process to facilitate their translation of simple sentences.

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About the Author

Hoe Foo Terng, associate professor of Academy of Language Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Ph.D. in Chinese Studies, Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman. He specializes in the teaching and learning of Mandarin to non-native speakers and has developed "Word Sequence Diagram (WSD)" in teaching non-native learners of Mandarin language. From WSD, he developed GATT and GAT Learning Modules in teaching non-native speakers in translation and sentence reconstruction.